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Women's Concerns

Report



Navigating the complex world of dating and mating

The fascinating topic of women and dating touches my world on a regular basis. I have vivid memories of my few experiences of dating as a teenager. I remember terrific and terrible times in my college dating days. Finding a life partner and committing myself to marriage has been a twenty-five year adventure. Daily, I work as a pastor with college-student women who struggle through dating dilemmas and disasters of all degrees and dimensions. I hear about loneliness, parental disapproval, self-doubts, getting dumped, harassment, abuse, and date rape. I also hear about friendship, love, support, excitement, discovery, and growth. Beyond my work setting, I have been privileged to know women who have dated as older adults, after divorce and widowhood, as lesbians, within the disabilities community, on the Internet, and in high school. All have shown me unique facets of women's dating and mating experiences.

I have learned that each culture has its own ways to date and find a mate. Several years ago I was privileged, along with a group of women students from Goshen College, to share the stories of our lives with village women in Maguiahio, Cote d'Ivoire, West Africa. "Do you have polygamy in America?" They asked. "How much do you pay for your flip-flops and for your bra? Do you have money saved up to pay for your mother-in-law's funeral?" When the conversation turned back to dating and mating, they told us, "It's all very simple here. In the middle of the night, a man comes and steals you out of your house. In the morning, he goes back to see your elders, and they negotiate what he will have to give them in order to marry you. Then you live in his village for the rest of your life." We were amazed! "OK," they admitted, "we usually get stolen by a man we like, and we have it all arranged so we know which night he is coming to steal us."

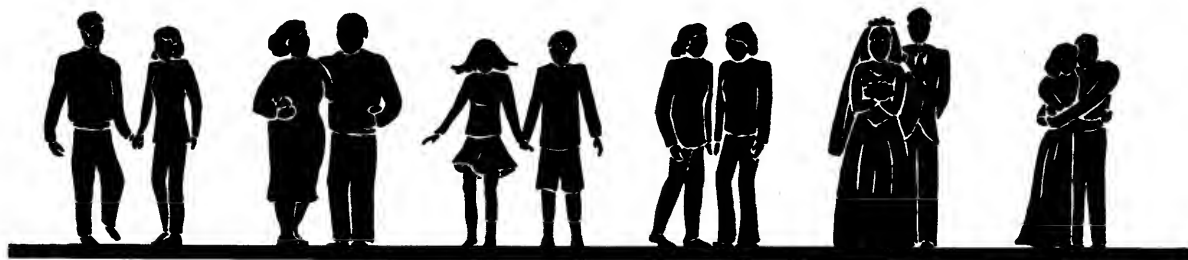
No matter how it is practiced, seeking a mate is a universal human impulse that is propelled by both biology and social convention. Among human families, we may have extremely different ways to do it, but in most cultures, many people end up in some sort of pairs. It is all part of God's good gift of sexuality. In the opening chapter of her book *Sexuality: God's Good Gift*, Anne Krabill Hershberger writes, "So why is our sexuality being named a gift from God? We think about the fact that God chose to make us sexual, both alike as people and different in gender, but each of us as a sexual being. Sexuality has been given to us. It is here, with us, a gift. It is key in making us who we are."

Sexuality is a gift, and the sexual ingredient in our relationships enriches them. It also makes our relationships complicated. Dating and mating, especially for women, is one of the most risky, complex, and challenging of life's passages. Books on the subject in my local Christian bookstore include revealing titles such as *Dangerous Dating*, *I Kissed Dating Good-bye*, *Lady in Waiting*, *How to Know if Someone is Worth Pursuing in 2 Dates or Less*, and more hopefully, *Finding the Love of your Life!*

Before you rush out to buy a possibly useful dating book with a catchy title, here to stimulate our reflections on women's dating experiences are eight articles written by a fascinating group of women. I am grateful to each one for sharing her life in this way. I expect that every reader will find something inspiring in these pages. Thanks be to God for creating us as sexual beings and for never leaving us or forsaking us along the journey of dating and mating!

—compiled by Sylvia Shirk Charles

Sylvia Shirk Charles is married to Robert Charles, and mother of Laura, Dan and Sophie. She is a member of Waterford Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana, where she is a mentor and Jr. High sponsor. She thoroughly enjoys working with students in her role as campus minister at Goshen College, Indiana.



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From the editor

I thought that I had everything to say and little to learn on this matter. I'm 32 years old and have just married. I have years of dating experience. On a couple occasions, I have gone through the joy of believing I had met my life partner and the pain of realizing later that I had not. I have experienced fun times and betrayal. I enjoyed my years as a single person but also worried that I might never experience married life. My husband and I began our dating relationship with clear expectations and intentions, having learned from our experiences. What I want to learn now, as I optimistically look forward to our years together, are all of the skills needed for a successful marriage.

And still, I read these articles with interest. I was reminded that there are as many different dating experiences as there are people. All of us have been uniquely affected by our dating relationships and have stories to tell that enrich the rest of us. Sylvia, in her introduction, lists some of the different kinds of women with dating experiences whom she has known through work and personal relationships. Even with the variety of voices in this issue, we were not able to hear from everyone. We do not have articles written from the point of view of a divorced woman, a woman dating while raising young children, a lesbian, or a woman who has chosen to remain a life-long single, for example. Whether or not we would have agreed with the perspectives of these women, as we may or may not agree with the viewpoints of the women who wrote for this issue, we learn from and are stretched by the dialogue.

In the midst of all of our differences and unique experiences, though, is our commonality. We have been created by God to seek intimate relationships with other human beings, whether they be familial, romantic, or platonic. All of us, along with the women who have written articles for this issue, have wonderfully God-given abilities to love. With this issue, we celebrate that.

—Debra Gingerich, editor

Demeter in crisis: Compassion and confusion on the dating front

The Greek goddess Demeter would appreciate my dating predicament found at the crossroads of Christian feminism and conflict transformation theory. Both willfully powerful and nurturing, this goddess of earth and harvest is usefully regarded as a personality archetype. Demeter is confident and generous. She's also sensitive to other's needs, compassionate to a fault, and fosters dependency.

This archetype helps me better understand and explain the relationship fiasco in which I found myself my final semester of college. Historically, I've been drawn to the wounded, over-achieving male. I seem to make myself available in ways that make them feel comfortable and safe, out of a genuine desire to see them open up and heal. The emotional bond created by shared journeys does not need to, but often gives way to romantic relationships. This wasn't problematic for me until two such encounters overlapped in the winter of my senior year.

In the midst of a long-distance relationship, I found myself growing very close to and quite fond of Manuel*, who was also in a long-distance relationship. With both men, emotional intimacy grew rapidly out of a friendship based in common interests and activities. I recall one night in particular when Demeter's archetypal qualities were in acute tension with presumed dating guidelines:

I sat hunched over my potter's wheel as it hummed to a stop. A distorted mass of wet clay sat where a cylinder had grown moments before. It collapsed when I lost concentration and directed all my attention to the potter across from me. As Manuel confidently centered and molded the clay, he shared in detail an experience of personal violation and its lasting repercussions. A set of mugs stood between us before he finished.

* Name has been changed.

"I became exhausted, not by my academic workload or extra-curricular activities but by processing the developing relationship with Manuel."

I felt conflicted as the silence between us grew louder. I longed to care for this victim who grew into the family hero. The physical distance that separated us seemed wrong considering the emotional intimacy of his sharing, and I wanted to communicate with a hug that I was comfortable with his pain and wholly accepted this new dimension of his person. Despite our close relationship, or more likely because of it, I stayed planted. I feared that reaching out could make us too vulnerable. I didn't want to risk crossing lines of appropriate intimacy. And so, I felt no more capable of uprooting myself from the stool than to change this friend's past.

This tension I felt didn't meet my standards of logic. Why should I find myself so unsettled when operating out of fixtures of my belief system—post-modern Christian feminism and conflict transformation theory? Women should be free to develop meaningful relationships of all kinds and respond to need. Also, we have a unique power to create life-giving alternatives to violence and facilitate healing. Then why was I so confused?

Journal entries remind me of the inner battles, confusion, and frustration I felt when trying to negotiate my relationships with my boyfriend and Manuel. The same questions arose repeatedly in my writing. How should I approach the situation with integrity and honesty to myself, to Manuel, and our significant others? What does it mean to live within commitments and values while also owning feelings and listening to the present experience? What does God have to say about this? Why, when I prayed for direction in my dating relationship, did thoughts of Manuel enter my consciousness?

Manuel and I discussed the complexities of deep relationships with the opposite sex but decided we wanted to continue to pursue our friendship anyway. Neither of us were married, after all. Despite my resolve to sustain a platonic friendship and "prove" the viability of intimate

cross-gender pals, it was hard to stay at that level. I became exhausted, not by my academic workload or extra-curricular activities but by processing the developing relationship with Manuel. I was also overwhelmed by the emotional gymnastics required to maintain two intimate relationships. Yes, I was naive; perhaps Demeter's compassion superseded my common sense. The two were in competition for my energy and loyalty.

Manuel and I simply couldn't continue at the emotional depth we had reached. The return of our dating partners and the end of the semester brought, by default, partial resolution to the fiasco. The small college town wasn't big enough for the four of us, and I often felt overwhelmed in the weeks that followed. I talked with my boyfriend about the situation, as Manuel did with his girlfriend. When I was around Manuel and his girlfriend, I felt guilty for knowing him so well and for caring so much about him. This was regardless of the love I felt for my dating partner and my thoughts of long-term commitment to him.

Manuel and I didn't spend much time together those days, but we did meet when one or the other felt it necessary. I recall one morning in particular when we went on an early morning jog. As we circled around a familiar route, he articulated many of the feelings of loss and vulnerability that we shared. We agreed that our dating circumstances would be reassessed at the end of the summer and that the "door was open to the other."

Was this healthy? Eventually I felt lost—slogging through issues of honesty, intimacy, and hurt feelings. Tired of living the script of an ethically concerned soap opera, I coped by shutting down my emotions. I focused on graduation hubbub and looked forward to escaping the situation all together.



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"Navigating additional one-on-one, cross gender relationships requires risk assessment skills, vigilant observation of emotional boundaries, and mutual transparency."

"Unfortunately, because of the rape victim's feelings of guilt, she often buries the truth of the experience. I convinced myself that what had happened was merely a result of my own stupidity, and, therefore, not something that I wanted to think about, ever."

Summer's foreign setting and new job served as a temporary distraction but denial did not provide resolution. Living in limbo wasn't much easier there than at college. I felt hurt and angry by Manuel's silence in what I interpreted as an abrupt dismissal of me from his memory. And I was angry with myself for investing so deeply when I knew the risk involved. The emotional resolution came with time, only after significant processing and scaling back of the friendship. Manuel's girlfriend began the process of defusing the situation with a letter to me. My response recounted the development of the convoluted friendship as well as some thoughts from processing since the semester's end, many of which are incorporated in this article.

Greek Mythology does provide insight, yes even into the dating lives of contemporary Mennonite women. I would share the following learning with Demeter if we met for coffee to discuss historic tensions today:

Navigating additional one-on-one, cross gender relationships requires risk assessment skills, vigilant observation of emotional boundaries, and mutual transparency. We need to choose a primary relationship and make friends and decisions that give life to this most intimate relationship.

The implementation of peacemaking theory to reconcile strained relationships from intimacy gone awry is much like working in a conflict zone. It's hard, but necessary, for each stakeholder to move beyond their own position to see the impact of their behavior through the eyes of the other. We each must move beyond defending our own intent to embracing the fear and pain of the others involved.

Fun? No. Healing? Maybe. Necessary? Yes.

I hope in the future I'm better prepared to live fully and generously without compromising the integrity of my primary relationships or encouraging others to do the same. Demeter may or may not agree, but some urges need to be stifled and compassion fatigue serves no one.

The writer works in a voluntary service assignment and is content as a single (non-dating) individual.

Healing love

A month before I started my freshman year at a small Mennonite college, I was date raped. In this article, I choose not to go into details of the rape. Rather, I want to tell about what happened afterward, because my story is about the healing. Although every survivor's journey is different, the process of healing has many similar elements for most women.

My healing process began when I realized that I had been raped in the first place. I wouldn't have thought that rape was something a person had to realize. I always thought that I would know if I had been raped. Unfortunately, because of the rape victim's feelings of guilt, she often buries the truth of the experience. I convinced myself that what had happened was merely a result of my own stupidity and, therefore, not something that I wanted to think about, ever. It was not until I began dating a new boyfriend at college and began talking about our past sexual histories that I discovered what had happened.

Describing what it felt like to realize that I had been violated is hard for me. I remember walking to classes, watching the yellow leaves fall from the trees, and feeling like I was so alone, even among so many people. I felt out of control of my life and my future. When I was robbed of the ownership of my body, I lost the sense that I had any control over anything that could happen to me. I felt that I no longer had a voice in my own destiny. I still went to classes and ate lunch in the cafeteria, but all my actions seemed robotic to me. I felt like a walking zombie.

The loss of control that I felt created panic attacks. My panic attacks would be triggered by any small thing that reminded me of that night: a sound, a smell, a certain look from my boyfriend. My breathing would quicken, and my eyes would blur until everything in the room was merely a haze. Images would leap out at me from my memory, creating a hallucination of being raped. My boyfriend tells me that my body would convulse and that I would plead with an invisible rapist. These panic attacks were particularly scary because I had no control over them. My boyfriend, who had only known me for a few weeks, had no control over them either. He would stay close to me and

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Responding to rape

The hardest part for many survivors of sexual assault and abuse, as the author notes, is healing the guilt and releasing the shame associated with the experience. It is not uncommon for survivors to be in denial for weeks, months, or even years. In such situations the experience does affect survivors, on some level. The author's violation came at the time of her rape, not at the point of recognition that it was, in fact, rape, nor at her disclosure of the experience to her boyfriend. As was true for the author, crisis (in her case, panic attacks) can promote healing.

Rape is never a woman's fault, no matter what she did or did not do; we should live in a world where rape is unthinkable, rather than in a "rape-prone" society, as is the U.S. We commend the author for her bravery in sharing this story and long for the time when survivors will feel support and acceptance from the larger community.

—Beth Graybill, MCC U.S. Women's Concerns Director

FACTS ABOUT DATE RAPE

- Date rape is a crime.
- Date rape is a violation of trust.
- Date rape is only the rapist's fault.
- Rape and date rape are not rare. In the United States, one in four college women will face an experience of rape or attempted rape by graduation.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE RAPED

- Get medical attention
- Decide whether or not you want to prosecute. If so,
 - Report the crime to the authorities.
 - Don't wash or change clothes before your exam.
- Contact a rape crisis center for support.

SUPPORTING A FRIEND WHO HAS BEEN RAPED

- Stay with her. Listen. Pray. Don't ask "why" questions.
- Reassure her that the rape was not her fault.
- Offer to go with her to get medical help.
- Offer to go with her to report the crime.
- Encourage her to talk with a counselor.

USEFUL BOOKS ON RAPE

- *No Fairy Godmothers No Magic Wands: The Healing Process After Rape* by Judith H Katz
- *If She is Raped* by Alan W. McEvoy and Jeff B. Brookings
- *Surviving Sexual Assault* by the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women



"I began to see his arms as a place of sanctuary, a place very different from the arms of the last man I had known."

"In the United States, the way people find a life partner is by first falling in love and then getting married. In India we believe in getting married first and then falling in love."

hold me in his arms, allowing me to struggle against him and against imaginary people. When the attack was over, he would shelter me and take care of me, drying my tears and running his fingers through my tousled hair. I began to see his arms as a place of sanctuary, a place very different from the arms of the last man I had known.

His faith in me and the caring that he gave to me brought much strength to our relationship because I knew that he would always stand by me, no matter what we might face in the future. He helped me look in the Bible to find passages that would encourage me to keep stepping forward each day. Together, we found Psalm 27 which reads in verse 1, "The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strong hold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?" These lines and the rest of the psalm comforted me after every panic attack and gave me courage to face another day of life, rather than choosing the easy route of death.

So much more remains to be told of my healing journey. I could tell you about the day I told my parents what had happened to me; the process and humiliation of being tested for sexually transmitted diseases at a free health clinic; the times I thought I would never get better; or the day I realized that I was better. I could tell you about how wonderful it felt to be named on the Dean's list of my college both semesters, even though I was battling with panic and depression. I could describe what it feels like to not be able to get out of bed in the morning and what it feels like to visit a psychologist. But what is really important is that I did move on and that I can now live life fully again. Because of my relationship with my new boyfriend, which was strengthened by supporting each other through such a tough time, I found that good could come out of evil. We are now engaged. Of course, not every problem is solved, but I can now smile again without having to force it. I can focus on happier things in life. *For in the day of trouble, God kept me safe in his dwelling; he hid me in the shelter of his tabernacle; and set me high upon a rock* (from Psalm 27:5).

The author of this piece is choosing to remain anonymous not because of being ashamed by what happened to her but because she doesn't want this experience to be the one thing that defines her when there is so much more to her personality. Also, she feels that her story is the story of many women and chooses to represent them in this article. For more information the writer suggests <http://rapecrisis.txcyber.com>

by Nisha Springer

From arranged marriage to love marriage

I was born and raised in India. I grew up in a Christian family that was quite liberal according to Indian standards. There was no pressure to date anyone but there was pressure to get married. Dating and getting married, in other words "love marriages," are not very common in India. The more popular way of finding a life partner is through arranged marriages. In the United States, the way people find a life partner is by first falling in love and then getting married. In India we believe in getting married first and then falling in love. The philosophy behind this, as I have understood it, is that parents have more wisdom and experience. They have lived longer than their children, and therefore they have the ability to look for a match for their children, considering qualities that go beyond good looks and money.

My family, being very liberal, made a deal with me. The deal was that either I could find myself a life partner or they could find me a life partner, whichever came first. When I was 19, the hunt for a life partner began with my parents looking for a suitable boy for me. I however did not start the hunt until I was 21.

The thought of dating always excited me and gave me a lot of warm-fuzzy feelings. When I was 15 years old, I wanted to date a handsome man. It did not matter if the man was kind-hearted, concerned about the same issues, or even of the same faith. All that mattered to me was that he was handsome, had a lot of money, and owned a cool car. The purpose of dating a man with these qualities was to show him off to the world, so that everyone could compliment me on what a "fine" man I was dating.

At the age of 23, I dated a man with all the qualities mentioned above. I dated a man who was handsome, a sweet talker with lots of his parents' money to spend, a cool car, and he was a Hindu. We had a long-distance dating relationship. A month after we started dating, I discovered that he was "two-timing me." He was dating another

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woman in the city where he lived and I was his "other" girlfriend in a town where he made a lot of business trips. This experience made me realize that materialism and outward appearances were irrelevant characteristics. What mattered more were the inner qualities of a person.

I felt I had failed in my attempts to find a life-partner because my sense of discernment was immature and materialistic. I told my parents that I would marry the man they chose for me. My parents agreed to do this and continued to leave the option open for me to date someone if ever I came across a nice, caring person.

When I was 24, my parents arranged my marriage with a man who was the son of some good friends of theirs. I met and got engaged to this man in three days. We were supposed to get married a year later. I took this bold step because I trusted my parents' choice completely. I knew that even if this man was not handsome and rich according to my standards, he was going to be a kind man with good values. I followed this man to the United States, where he was a student, so that I could get to know him better before we got married. Two months after my arrival, things fell apart and our engagement ended. This experience made me pessimistic about dating and marriage. I felt that it did not matter who found the man, the basic fact was that most men did not know how to honor, respect, and love a woman. I decided that I was going to remain single all my life.

Ryan and I met in the summer of 1998 at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. I was working in the library that summer, and he was taking a class. We were attracted to each other from the beginning. In the fall, we started dating, and I laid aside my decision to remain single. However, due to my previous experiences, I was very cautious. Ryan and I did not rush into our relationship. We took the time to get to know each other in the midst of our studies, careers, and other extra curricular activities.



Some of the important things that we looked for in our relationship were: how we got along with each other's family; what our religious beliefs were; our views on various social and religious issues; being sensitive to each other's culture; and our moral and ethical values. We found that in spite of our different cultures and the different ways we were raised, we had a lot in common. We were also excited about constantly discovering and learning new things about each other, things that were part of 25 years of growing up and living in two different corners of the world.

After a year of dating, we decided to get married. In making an important decision like this, we had to face the fact that whether we lived in the

United States or in India, one of us would always be far away from our families. Ryan and I also felt that it was important for us to visit India and my family. He could see where I grew up and the culture that molded me, and I could figure out if going back to India would change my mind about marrying Ryan. The result of our trip was that Ryan fell in love with India and my family, and I discovered that going back to India did not change my mind about marrying Ryan.

On July 1, 2000 we were married at Waterford Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana. My parents, who came from India to attend the wedding, were able to meet Ryan's parents. It was a wonderful experience for both families to meet each other to discover the common values they shared and to learn new things from each other. This meeting of our parents was a great affirmation, for Ryan and me, of the decision we had made to marry each other.

Nisha Springer is married to Ryan Springer. She is a graduate of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and holds a certificate in theology and ethics. At present, she works at Mennonite Mutual Aid in the Stewardship Education Center as an administrator for Stewardship University.

"The many life decisions made during the late teens and early twenties can make daily life stressful and undermine even the most well-balanced and confident adolescent. The knowledge of a parent's certain, unchanging love is a gift we must give often."

by Patricia Lehman McFarlane

My daughter's dating! — One mother's journey

When 15-year-old Jennifer skipped into the house one day after school with the announcement "Eric* and I are dating," I realized that the time had come about which many friends had warned us when she was two. "She's so beautiful," they would tell us. "You will have to guard the door with a shotgun when she grows up!" I laughed at them then. Now it wasn't so funny.

We had never made many rules about dating at our house. Rather, we had decided to wait until the time arrived and then choose what we felt were appropriate responses. Eventually we did make some guidelines—a parent should be at home when a date is there, we were always available to come get her if she was ever in an uncomfortable dating situation, and she could wake us up to talk anytime, even at 12:30 or 1:00 a.m.

Interestingly enough, we found that the principles we had already tried to put in place as parents when our children were smaller, were very helpful to us throughout the dating years. We put as priority a rule we had adopted from our own parents—keep your child's confidences no matter what. During Jennifer's dating years we tried to do just that, letting her know that whatever thoughts, feelings or actions she shared with us would be kept confidential. We were honored as she shared with us her

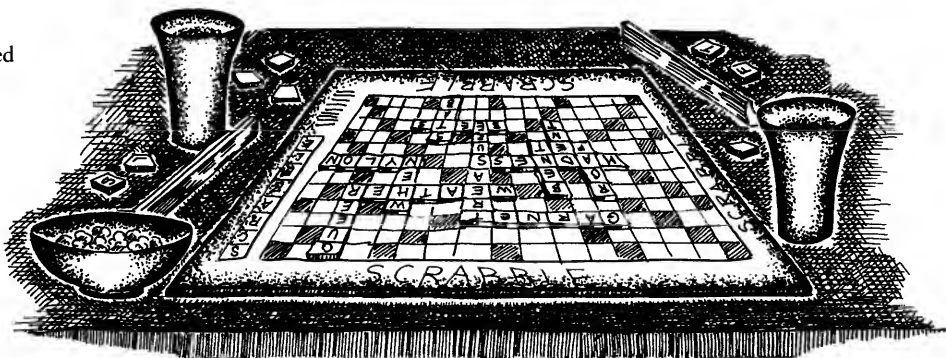
analysis of some of the young men she dated, as well as the reasons why her fiancé Jason became her chosen one.

A second principle that we tried to continue through Jennifer's dating years was saying "I love you" often—several times a day or even hourly! The many life decisions made during the late teens and early twenties—Who will I marry? What major will I decide on in college? Who will my close circle of friends be?—can make daily life stressful and undermine even the most well-balanced and confident adolescent. The knowledge of a parent's certain, unchanging love is a gift we must give often with plenty of hugs.

Yet another principle we attempted to keep in place during Jennifer's dating years was the principle of agreeing to disagree sometimes. Vehement arguments about a variety of dating issues didn't need to divide us if we respected each other's right to think independently and "push the envelope" a bit on the way to a clear position. Accompanying this principle was the need to trust our daughter and the Christian upbringing we had already given her. I often remembered the gift my own mother had given me in my young adult years; she expected me to be a person of integrity, and I did not want to disappoint her. Likewise, I tried to let Jennifer know that we expected her to be a delightful young woman of integrity, knowing that we usually become what we are "named" and expected to be.

My husband sometimes reminded me as we discussed possible concerns that "we are parenting for the long haul." Quick judgments today might irreparably damage the relationship we hoped to have 20 years down the road with our daughter and her family. He reminded me that

* Names have been changed



"As Jennifer's relationship with Jason grew from friendship to romantic love, we had the privilege of remembering our own love story and felt again the joy of new love as we watched their relationship grow and mature."

"Falling in love is complicated enough; it's even trickier when you are a woman who lives in a group home for persons with developmental disabilities."

we must see each conversation and challenge in light of that big picture. I am grateful to him for that wisdom which, on more than one occasion, kept me from miring down in a moment of fear or concern.

Listening well became more and more important as Jennifer began dating seriously during her college years. We often spoke via phone, finding it important to hear each other's human voices during these heartfelt conversations. Yes, we spent money in phone bills which might have been saved with email, but it was so important to hear each other's emotions and feelings in our voices. We have no doubt that these dollars are among our wisest investments.

As Jennifer's relationship with Jason grew from friendship to romantic love, we had the privilege of remembering our own love story and felt again the joy of new love as we watched their relationship grow and mature. "That girl Jason had met at camp" and "that guy Jen had met at camp" slowly became the girl and guy of each other's dreams. It was a special joy to watch Jennifer and Jason enjoy ordinary moments together. The week before their wedding, they were feeling stressed and peopled-out with all the wedding plans and the friends who had come early to California to share their special day. They declared a "Jen and Jason only" day while friends and family went swimming or reading at other locations. Late that night when we reconnected, I saw how they had spent their evening together. A well-filled Scrabble game sat completed on the coffee table, and I remember thinking that they were on the path to a happy marriage. These three months past their wedding day, they continue to dream of their future together.

We move forward now, wiser for the journey, we hope. I guess we had better be, because not too many months ago, Jennifer's brother Ted arrived home after school and announced "I'm dating Sarah*." And so we're starting the journey of parenting a dating teen once again. Having done it once, we're hoping we can do it again!

Patricia Lehman McFarlane is Assistant Professor of Communication and English at Goshen College, Goshen, IN. She attends Waterford Mennonite Church. She and her husband Art have two children, Jennifer and Ted.

by Gina Leichty

Love in all places

Sarah* didn't expect to fall in love while working over a heap of trailer hitches in group five, but love rarely prepares you for its arrival. Love sneaks in the side door when you're busy paying attention to nothing. Sarah remembers first meeting Robert* when she was laying out hitches to be sealed. She looked over the bin of trailer hitch balls to see his handsome face smiling in her direction. She smiled back at Robert because, she says, "At thirty five, you don't get to be so choosy. He had nice brown eyes and good teeth."

Sarah and Robert began meeting for lunch everyday, taking their breaks together, and meeting outside of work whenever possible. This continued for five years. Eventually, they started talking about marriage, getting a home, and possibilities for a future together. One day, Robert dropped to his knee in the workstation and popped "the question" with ring in hand.

No sooner had Sarah returned home with the engagement announcement than the troubles began. Sarah's father seemed quite distraught at the thought of his daughter marrying. He called Sarah's housemates and instructed them not to allow Sarah to go on dates without his explicit permission. Sarah was strongly discouraged from making public displays of affection and private expressions of affection were strictly forbidden. Her friends and family held meetings to discuss whether or not the couple should be encouraged to move their relationship ahead. In frustration, the couple decided to put their wedding plans on hold. Falling in love is complicated enough; it's even trickier when you are a woman who lives in a group home for persons with developmental disabilities.

Four years ago, I started sharing my home as a caregiver companion with persons with developmental disabilities. I have learned much about the commonalities between myself and the persons with whom I share the TV remote and my life. Perhaps there is nothing more synonymous than our desire to fulfill the capstone achievements of adult

*Names have been changed

"In fertile ground, a person with disabilities can grow into surprising roles and achieve feats previously thought to be insurmountable."

life, including dating, love, sex, marriage, and having children. Sarah's story is like most love stories where one must wrestle and come to terms with his or her own limitations. However, her story, as well as others with disabilities, has the unique twist of having many outside observers decide what additional limitations are appropriate to impose.

In all fairness, there are two sides to the story. The other side is the story of the caregivers, guardians, and parents who carry the responsibility to see that their adult child with disabilities finds a high quality of life. It is daunting to know that one's 35-year-old daughter will always need someone to remind her to pay her bills; to assist her in finding and maintaining a job; to advocate for her when her system of transportation to and from work regularly fails her; to remind her to regularly bathe, wash her clothes, and dress appropriately for various occasions; to schedule and take her to doctor's appointments; to help her gauge when she is really too ill to go to work; to assist her in asking off of work when she needs a vacation; to tell her to use the microwave as much as possible because the stove is dangerous; and to help her navigate the challenging issues of relationships and love.

Even with these limitations in cognitive abilities, income potential, judgment skills, or athletic ability, the desires of the heart are not easily dampened. Parents are often faced with the realization that their child not only desires some kind of platonic friend with whom they want to watch sitcoms but the full expression of intimacy including romantic and sexual relationships. It is in this very situation where women with disabilities and their families find themselves the most vulnerable. And so, when a daughter excitedly runs home with the dime-store, quarter-inch cubic zirconia sparkling on her left hand, it is easy to understand why most parents panic.

More often than not, persons with the best of intentions make attempts to distract, suppress, or redirect these desires in the name of "protection." For some women, acceptance of a life without opportunities to explore romantic interests comes with time. However, by and large, the echos of lament are heard from women seeking fulfillment, anguished caregivers, and families who do not know how to support their loved ones without potentially subjecting them to great harm.



The burden of responsibility to bring wholeness and healing to those who are broken in spirit should not rest merely on the backs of families and caregivers. Those of us in community with the church would be wise to heed the teachings of the apostle Paul, "[T]hose parts of the body which we regard as less honorable are treated with special honor . . . God has combined the various parts of the body so that there might be no sense of division in the body, but that all of its organs might feel concern for one another" (I Corinthians 12:24-25). As an example, I know of one congregation who has supported a married couple where both partners have developmental disabilities, by establishing three peer mentoring couples who provide additional support by helping the couple socialize and integrate into the congregation.

Without the support of the faith community, persons with disabilities, their families, and caregivers lack an integral component for success. With the support of welcoming communities, there can be a place for intellectually challenged women who long not only for a job in the community but a marriage in the chapel. In fertile ground, a person with disabilities can grow into surprising roles and achieve feats previously thought to be insurmountable.

It is my hope that more communities of faith will open themselves in this way or come up with other creative means to support families and persons with disabilities as they attempt to forge new roads. Today, Sarah and Robert are still very much in love and still determined to marry. They continue to wait for their opportunity to fulfill the desires of their hearts. We, as a caring community, continue to wrestle and search for ways in which to support them on the journey ahead.

Gina Leichty, 27, is the Director of the Merimna Homes, a residential program for adults with developmental disabilities. She is the mother of an energetic five year old daughter. Gina graduated from Goshen College with a degree in English and TESOL. In her free time, she enjoys traveling, hiking, and writing poetry.

"The main rule is that dating should be fun, not taxing or totally life consuming. Second, every girl should set her own guidelines about how much time dating will consume and physical limits that won't be crossed."

by Bethany Lehman

Teenage dating at its best

I once dated a guy who was on the soccer team and a friend of my older brother. I thought he was a nice and good-looking guy, maybe a little shy, too. We became friends and went out with groups for a while, but eventually we went on a date by ourselves. This is when I discovered just how shy he was. I think he said about five words all night besides "yes" or "no." It was a terrible night where I ended up racking my brain for conversation topics which never progressed very far. I learned the important lesson that I should date someone with common interests who I can talk to. Since then, various friends and I have agreed that dating for teenagers is a mix between having fun and finding the qualities in the opposite sex that you like. Since I am an idealist, as are many teenagers, I do believe that there is one perfect person for me. Through dating I have learned some characteristics that I would want my future mate to have. An important one is the characteristic of being outgoing since I am a very outgoing person.

While talking to a group of friends one evening, we came up with basic dating rules for teenage girls. The main rule is that dating should be fun, not taxing or life-consuming. Second, every girl should set her own guidelines about how much time dating will consume and physical limits that won't be crossed. These affect how serious her relationships will become.

Lisa's* story illustrates this: Lisa had a boyfriend for about a year. They liked each other a lot and spent all their time together until one day Lisa discovered that all she had in her life was her boyfriend. She had lost other friends because she had stopped spending time with them, her grades had dropped, and most importantly, her relationship with God had almost disappeared. The dating relationship had become so intense that it dominated her life. She took some time away from her boyfriend to reevaluate how she spent her time and to become focused on God again. Now Lisa is dating the same boy again, and the relationship is healthier because both of their lives are more balanced.

Personally, I have found it difficult to decide how much time should be devoted to a relationship. But when I feel that I'm not giving sufficient time to other things, I know the relationship needs to be reevaluated. I want to have a well-rounded life, spending time in many activities, not just one.

Dating can be good! Instead of dinner and a movie, a special date would include a unique activity. I planned such a date not long ago. We went on a double-date with good friends to see the musical *West Side Story*. Creative planning made this date unique and enjoyable.

Dating is a time to discover likable characteristics and form ideas of what I'd like future boyfriends (or a husband someday) to be like. But dating is just one of the many activities in which I participate. Talking to people and being in relationships are key ingredients to being a teenager. I love spending time with my friends and being with people from my class. Like many teenagers, people help to shape who I am and what I believe.

Bethany Lehman is a senior in high school. Her hobbies are reading, cooking, dancing, and playing tennis. She loves spending time with her friends and being with family. She also enjoys going to her youth group and singing in church. She plans on attending college next year. Some details of her story have been changed.



* Name changed

"When I was faced with widowhood, my chosen focus was the rearing of my three children. I realized that second marriages do not always result in conflicts with the children, but I was determined to leave no room for that kind of mistake."

by Pauline Yoder Kauffman

Dating after 70: Just as great as teenage dating!

I had been married to my first husband for 16 years when his death from Hodgkin's disease left me alone with three young children, ages 5, 12, and 14. It was a very good marriage, but I was not interested in considering another marriage at that point of my life. Raising my children was my first priority.

My concerns about remarriage were formed early in life. My cousin, whose widowed mother had remarried, was forced to live with our grandparents because of strife in the new blended family. I was greatly troubled by the fact that he was not able to be with his family. My mother also told me sad stories of her experiences with a step-mother, being passed from one relative to another, because she and her brother were not welcome as part of their new family. I was distressed by these stories and determined that I would never take the risk of having this happen to any of my children.

So when I was faced with widowhood, my chosen focus was the rearing of my three children. I realized that second marriages do not always result in conflicts with the children, but I was determined to leave no room for that kind of mistake. I felt I could not mix parenting and remarriage if there was a chance of losing my children. Friends who sometimes urged me to date had a hard time understanding my decision.

So, for about 30 years, I went on with life alone. After my children left home, I spent some time in Voluntary Service and caring for my aging parents. Life was good as I pursued many interests around me.

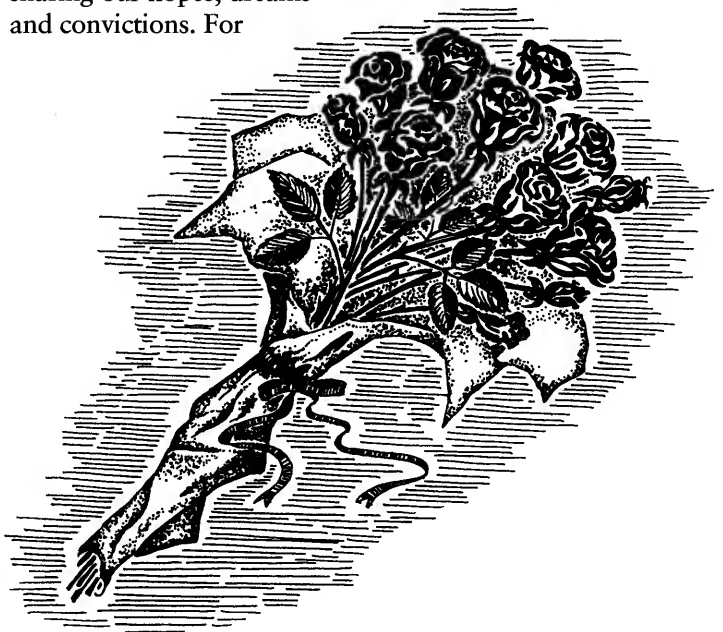
I was greatly surprised when, at age 70, an old family acquaintance whose wife was no longer living called to get together. By now, of course, the concerns of child rearing were gone. It was time to take a new look at dating. Even though 50 years had passed since I had

last dated, many considerations remained the same. The person must be, first of all, a Christian with beliefs like mine. He must be compatible, with a similar background, interests, and experiences. He must also have strong character and be of good standing in the community. The requirements were met, so it seemed appropriate to pursue the friendship.

We spent time working together on writing his weekly column for a community newspaper. However, as the relationship continued, his health deteriorated, finally resulting in full-time health care and ultimately his death. It had been a good, positive experience, but I was content to continue on as I was, pursuing the many interests around me as a single woman.

So again it was a shock to me to get a call from an old family friend whose wife had died several months before. We had known each other for nearly 60 years, having been neighbors and attending the same church. LeRoy had also sung with my first husband in a quartet for 12 years. Neither of us had ever thought of us being together but now that we were both alone, a friendship seemed quite natural.

At first, we simply visited by phone but soon began to spend time together at my home. We had much to talk about: catching up on the details of our separate lives and sharing our hopes, dreams and convictions. For



"We realized that people would need time to process our new relationship. Advice and criticism seem more prevalent the second time around, since our lives now are much more entwined with others than when we were teenagers in the dating process."

"Somewhere in the relationship, I had lost myself, forgotten who I really was, without even noticing it had happened until after the fact. I had to get re-acquainted with myself and figure out what my real needs and interests are, where I was going, what was most important to me and what I was created for."

several weeks, we tried to be discreet about seeing each other. We wanted time to get acquainted without the questions, comments, and possible criticism from friends and family. We realized that people would need time to process our new relationship. Advice and criticism seem more prevalent the second time around, since our lives now are much more entwined with others than when we were teenagers in the dating process.

The more time we spent together, the more we enjoyed each other and could see how much alike we are. We prayed much for God's direction and felt God leading our lives together in a definite way. LeRoy was more quickly confident about our future than I was, since God had revealed to him that I was to be his wife. But soon, I too became convinced that God meant for us to be together, and we became engaged.

Once we knew that we were to be married, we wanted to have the wedding within the next few months, since we realized that life is short. As we planned and waited with anticipation, we continued to enjoy our dates: listening to music and attending church services, plays and music programs together. We even visited family out-of-state, taking a 10-year-old grandchild on the train to Pennsylvania for several days. It was very enjoyable. We looked forward to our times together. Dating as older adults was just as great as when dating as teenagers, with the touch of a hand, a glance, a small gift, a token of love, roses picked and given. The relationship certainly gave me a new lease on life.

With this wedding, there were no parents to help with plans as there had been before. Instead, our children were involved in getting us organized and prepared. At the wedding, my son-in-law said he had never seen me so happy! He was right; he had never seen me married! That was three years ago, and it has not changed. We thank God for each day, hour and minute we have together.

Pauline Yoder Kauffman lives with her husband LeRoy in Goshen, IN. She is active at Greencroft Retirement Community on the resident's council and as a volunteer leading worship services for health care residents. She has three children and several grandchildren.


by Elsie Wiebe

Thirty, single and enjoying my own company

I always thought I was a confident person, sure of who I was and where I was going, independent, and secure. After the breakdown of a relationship headed for marriage, however, I found myself mired in a depression from which I thought I might never recover. Books I read and people I talked to said that time heals pain. I tried desperately to convince myself that was true. Would I always feel the deep intense ache of loss? It was the death of shared dreams, shared experiences, intimacy, shared family and friend relationships. It was the death of affectionate touches and laughing with someone who shared significant history.

I felt lost, angry, hurt, depressed, cynical about love, and convinced that God did not care about romance and companionship. I spent well over a year with long visits to my therapist, re-telling my story to the same friends who already knew it, and trying to move on. The source of my pain wasn't just the breakup, it had triggered other injustices, violations, and unresolved grief which were staring me straight in the eyeballs, overwhelming and consuming me.

Sadness ran deep. I would wake up, crying, afraid, aching for someone to be with—convinced I was not created for singleness nor to sleep alone forever. Wondering if the loneliness was something I would be able to befriend some day or if this longing would always be with me. Unable to keep the pain to myself, I was vulnerable with people, letting them know I was not doing well—STILL. It felt like I was taking way too long to "get over it."

Somewhere in the relationship, I had lost myself, forgotten who I really was, without even noticing it had happened until after the fact. I had to get re-acquainted with myself and figure out what my real needs and interests were, where I was going, what was most important to me, and for what I was created.

continued on page 14

"I started noticing the many benefits to the single life and began enjoying my own company."

Eventually, sanity was restored. I started to last a week or so without a major bawl session. I got my laugh back! That was a great sign that things were looking up. I started noticing the many benefits to the single life and began enjoying my own company. Not having a boyfriend, an assumed date for many functions, I soon learned that my contact list of phone numbers had to be long so I could find someone available with whom to do impulsive social things. I became deliberate about including people in my life. I lived with a friend who was a single parent with two daughters. Though I had a private suite, we shared a kitchen and meals. It was important for me to have someone ask me how my day was and to share our lives.

Several years now since the break-up, I am in a serious relationship. This past fall, we celebrated a year of dating each other. Having worked through a lot of loss and other issues, I feel like I have finished grieving for now. It feels as though we are both equally active participants in our relationship. We are committed to allowing each other plenty of space for our separate commitments, relationships, career demands and interests. Adequate space apart to pursue our own dreams and priorities allows us to bring interesting and new experiences to our relationship and to really "be there" when we are together. Both of us have done some serious self discovery in the past few years and made deliberate personal changes and adjustments to how we experience life.

Recognizing that marriage would again bring change, we are happy not to rush plans. Marriage is a common goal and dream but not at the cost of enjoying today. Marriage is not the ultimate goal or purpose for us to be together—not at the cost of enjoying the stages between now and then. Dating, playing, disagreeing, understanding, laughing, misunderstanding, getting to know family, and learning about how we fight together and resolve things are all important pieces. Others seem to think they can hear my biological clock ticking, but having learned to befriend my loneliness and enjoy my own company as a single person, I am not willing to give it up, not just yet.

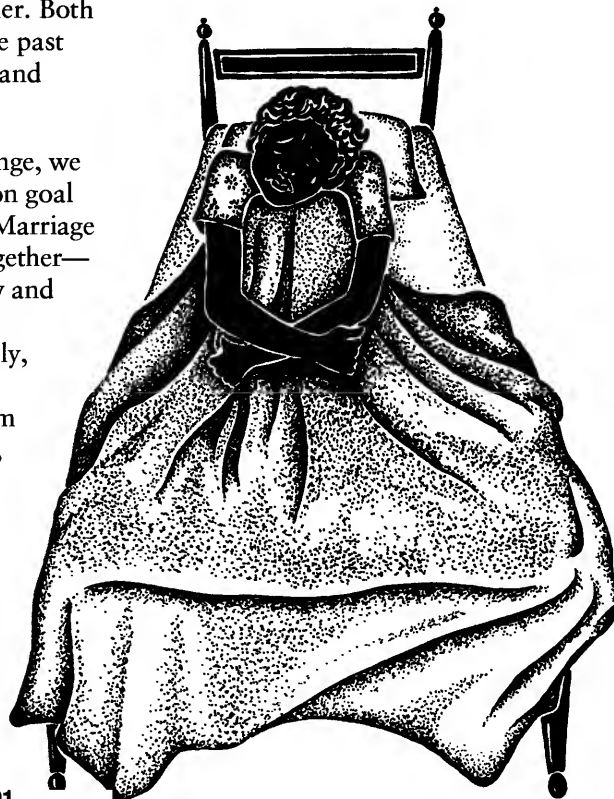
Elsie Wiebe lives in historic Fort Langley, British Columbia, in a small home overlooking a beautiful farm with a great mountain view. She is employed by MCC BC, half time for Women's Concerns, and half time for Peace and Service Committee, including a domestic violence sexual abuse project.

News and verbs

Elisabeth Harder has joined the staff of the MCC U.S. Washington Office as Legislative Assistant for Domestic Affairs. She oversees issues related to women, along with other responsibilities.

Ruth Preston Schilk was ordained as pastor of Lethbridge Mennonite Church, Lethbridge, Alberta on October 22, 2000. She has been pastoring this congregation since October 1998 and is the first Mennonite woman to be ordained in the province of Alberta.

The MCC U.S. Washington Office is starting a hotline on policies and legislation related to women's concerns/issues that are facing the U.S. federal government. If you would like to be updated on these issues and decisions that the U.S. government is making regarding them, please send us your name, address and email address.



Thanks to all of the subscribers who returned the questionnaire recently sent to you. Your feedback is valuable as we set direction for *Report*. Some responses to the question "Why do you choose to subscribe to *Women's Concerns Report*?" follow:

- I appreciate the integrity in which a wide variety of current and, at times, controversial topics are addressed.
- I value the perspective of other Mennonite women.
- It deals with issues not treated responsibly elsewhere.
- Because of the Anabaptist slant on women's issues. I have been amazed at the subjects you have dared to address.
- The distinctive voice of women in a peace denomination struggling to maintain internal integrity in a world which, no matter the location, makes the task difficult.
- For the broader perspective given on the topics and issues that *Report* covers.
- I am very interested in women's issues and find it helpful and interesting to hear experiences from a variety of perspectives.
- The refreshing thoughts and ideas not encountered in many Christian periodicals.
- There are not many other places to get info/reflections etc. from an Anabaptist female point of view.
- To be informed on the issues women experience in the church.
- It is a publication that addresses numerous topics I am interested in and stretches me to think outside my box.
- I want to keep up on issues and things church-wide. I want to know what women are doing and thinking in these times.
- I like the issues discussed and the numerous points of views expressed.
- I enjoy the stimulating articles on subjects relating to women that I find in no other magazine.

Letters

TO THE EXCELLENT RESOURCES MENTIONED IN THE November-December 2000 issue, "The implications of translation," I would like to add Phyllis Tribble's *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress, 1978). It was she who knocked my socks off (and drew me increasingly to Creator God) with such revelations as:

"In its singular form the [Hebrew] noun *rehem* means 'womb' or 'uterus'. . . . The womb protects and nourishes, but does not possess or control. It yields its treasure in order that wholeness and well-being may happen. The imagery of the Isaiah 46:3-4 poetry stops just short of saying that God possesses a womb. Clearly, however, Yahweh bears Israel from its conception to its older age. . . . In biblical traditions an organ unique to the female becomes a vehicle pointing to the compassion of God" (pages 37, 39ff.).

The King James translators apparently were too embarrassed to accurately render Hebrew *rehem* into English "womb," so they opted for "bowels (of compassion)." Intestines! That's quite a switch!

Read Phyllis Tribble.

—Muriel T. Stackley

I'M WRITING ON BEHALF OF THE BOARD OF ELDERS AT Central Heights Church. After having read the *Women's Concerns Report* from July–August 2000, we are filled with disappointment and concern. You express in your purpose statement that you desire to provide a forum through which " . . . women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality" yet, I can't help but feel that you are driving a wedge into some of the very foundations upon which the church has been built and thus are destroying the wholeness and mutuality you claim you want to build.

First, please help me understand how having music that is inclusive of gay and lesbian Christians helps build unity in the body of Christ. [The writer] touts *Bring the Feast* as one of the few songbooks that does just that. Yet, the

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

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homosexual lifestyle is not compatible with the body of Christ. I don't view homosexuality as any different than any other sexual sin, but I also don't sing songs that are inclusive of adultery or fornications. I want to challenge them in their lifestyle and encourage them towards repentance and right relationships with Jesus Christ.

Secondly, the article "Ritual in the earth" smacks of New Age Philosophy. From celebrating the fall equinox, to practicing "earth-conscious ritual" it sounds as if you are advocating worship of the creation rather than the creator. I'm all in favor of ritual and as a church we desire to bring it into our different worship celebrations, but it must always point to God the Creator and not his creation.

Down through the years MCC has done marvelous and necessary work, but in producing material that points to something other than the redemptive interaction of God in human affairs, you are denigrating that tradition and history.

—*Pastor Christopher Douglas*

Editors note: In agreement with our goal to offer a place for dialogue between women within the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches, we invite letters from readers that speak to the issues raised and the perspectives presented in *Report*. Although we try to print all letters, they may be shortened or edited to fit available space. All letters must be signed, although writers may request to have their names withheld.

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